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# Pedestrian Pedagogy of Place: Nurturing an Ecological Consciousness through Slow Explorations of the Public Realm

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# **Pedestrian Pedagogy of Place:**

**Nurturing an Ecological Consciousness  
through Slow Explorations  
of the Public Realm**

**Kevin Pozzi  
Fall 2018**

**Portland State University  
Educational Leadership & Policy:  
Leadership for Sustainability Education  
Master of Arts Comprehensive Exam**

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# Step I: PREAMBLE

## INTRODUCTION

*“Clangitty, clang, claaaaaang, clangclangclang, CLANG!” bellow the hard spoons as they are dragged along the metal fence of a ball diamond in a local Portland park. These spoons work, we’ve decided, after I’ve inquired with the students to see if they think these kitchen tools can make music. Our ears work too, as we can all hear the whirling of metal-on-metal echoing throughout the park. With our gaze now trending upward, the squirrels have taken notice of the cacophony and frozen in place on their oak, demonstrating to the preschoolers that our actions, no matter their size, can have consequences outside of themselves. And then just like that, our spoon-as-instrument experiment is finished, and we are headed to the oak, to meet the tree with our fingertips, and begin the sensorial exploration cycle anew.*

While the setting, characters, and individual explorations may shift, this educational vignette plays out every Thursday and Friday morning somewhere across the city. Each week, I get the pleasure of leading a ‘Ladybug Walk’ for Portland Parks Environmental Education, an opportunity to oh-so-slowly explore a different local park or natural area with preschoolers and their grownups. These explorers are offered a red-and-black-spotted backpack that includes such items as a spoon, a paintbrush, a plastic tub, and a rainbow bracelet – common household tools chosen so adults can eventually mimic our journey without a guide.

The objective is not so much to instruct as it is to gently direct attention and invoke a sense of wonder, moving at a preschooler’s pace that covers the span of perhaps a quarter of a mile in the length of an hour. We chart an unguided path: following a butterfly down a hill, matching colors in a pile of leaves, counting acorns until we can’t any higher – and yes, even

remaining awestruck by a simple metal fence. Boredom and time seem not to exist for them, only an intense presence with the current activity and whatever draws their senses.

Rachel Carson (1965) puts words to this phenomenon in *A Sense of Wonder*, explaining that a “child’s world is fresh and new and beautiful, full of wonder and excitement. It is our misfortune that for most of us that clear-eyed, that true instinct for what is beautiful and awe-inspiring is dimmed and even lost before we reach adulthood” (p. 56). The time of early childhood is one of flexible identity, when the concept of self and other is still forming (Sobel, 1998), and significant meaning is derived from an emotional, imaginative connection between self and the broader world (Dirkx, 2001, p. 64). These students are slowly merging their identities with their place through bodily, sensory connection and a heart full of wonder.

While only an hour in scope, this educational experience embodies the core principles of my learning journey throughout the Leadership for Sustainability Education (LSE) program and my budding career path as an educator: weaving place-based education, sensory learning, and an emergent ecological consciousness onto the canvas of our modern urban landscape.

## **MY EDUCATIONAL AND LEADERSHIP PHILOSOPHY**

The most transformational and foundational of my educational experiences have been rooted physically, culturally, and spiritually in a specific place. The amalgamation of matter and space that we call place has educated me more than a book ever will, which echoes Orr’s assertion that “knowledge of a place — where you are and where you come from — is intertwined with knowledge of who you are. Landscape, in other words, shapes mindscape” (as cited in Stone & Barlow, 2005, p. 93). Now able to put educational and philosophical

concepts into a lifetime of feeling, I have found my identity shift from an individual in place to one indivisible from place.

At more difficult periods of my life, amidst reckoning with a lack of identification with traditional culture, faith, profession, and normative sexuality, I would often find myself metaphorically throwing my hands up in the air, and ignoring my strong emotional fugue via long, exploratory walks throughout Portland and its leafy neighborhoods. With such detachment from societal expectations, I can say with certainty that these walks, and the sensory beauty of the city's gardens, architecture, and community ethos, overwhelmed my own issues and re-oriented me towards a life of service. Such a broad civics lesson instilled a fascination with the public realm and allowed a sense of place to develop within.

These mere interactions evolved into intentional actions – identifying and inventorying streets with Urban Forestry, depaving parking lots, pulling weeds at a local community garden – before eventually shaping my career path towards sustainability education, and finally, broadening my identity into an immersive eco-consciousness. By participating with others in service to the Earth, I no longer felt alone and individualized, but rather as a unique self who happened to be nested within a much larger universe of selves (Naess, as cited in Moolaakkattu, 2010). I grew inspired to care for the Earth and its many inhabitants not out of fear of its destruction but from an intimate connection and identity merger with my place.

If "personal success is intimately connected with self-actualization" (hooks, 1994, p. 18), then as an educator, I want to be crystal clear about my underlying motivation for this work and how to best express it through a holistic teaching and learning philosophy. I am the living, breathing subject matter of my own education; the content of our learning is merely the

object (Orr, 1992). So rather than mastery of any particular subject, I commit to mastery of my own personhood, which will allow for the most effective sustainability educator to emerge.

Now an educator in practice, this personal ethos of care is extended to Earth's inhabitants through an educational model that is place-based, process-oriented, relational, and transformative, so that students feel intrinsically motivated and confident in their role as co-creators of knowledge (Burns, 2011; Orr, 1992; Sterling, 2001; Wheatley and Frieze, 2010). And when this care for Earth and its inhabitants begins to resonate deeply, educators need to ensure that it is distributed fairly through a process that acknowledges the pain of colonization (Gruenewald, 2003) and the joy that popular education methods can offer in the healing process (Wiggins, 2011). I feel called to expand the scope of sustainability beyond a to-do list of eco-action items, and work towards uniting activism and spirit onto the canvas of the present moment and place – such that society transitions from a consumeristic to a relational orientation with our shared public realm. This is sustainability as an ancient yet timelessly interconnected lens of which to view the world (Eisenstein, 2013).

## VALUES AND PRINCIPLES THAT GUIDE MY PRACTICE

Much like the annual turn of the seasons and rhythmic cycles of nature, the values and principles that guide my practice can best be charted as a circle: four stages, each with a different set of values to guide my purpose as an educator. Combined, these values and principles inform the guiding educational and leadership philosophy above.

Beginning with the source of my *inspiration*, we visit the value sets of *deep ecology*, *interbeing*, and a *felt sense of wonder*. Unmotivated by shallow, action-oriented solutions to our environmental crises, many of which simply perpetuate a consumerist lifestyle, I am far

more inspired to work on behalf of the Earth when I recognize that I am one with the Earth. As a child, I rarely found myself exploring the world with an unguided sense of wonder that leads to long-term interest and identity formation. As I emerged into adulthood, I would find myself yearning for an escape from life's messiness into the still, non-judgmental realm of nature. Unfortunately, I saw these realms as separate, because as Palmer (2007) notes, "What could be more banal than to stand on the midst of this astonishing universe, sifting its wonders through reductionist screens, debunking amazement with data and logic, downsizing mystery to the scale of our own minds?" (p. 114). Now nourished by a deep, felt *sense of wonder* and conscious connection, we recognize these efforts as emerging through our Earth bodies rather than simply on behalf of an inert planet (Eisenstein, 2013).

Yet as human history has shown, humans are not idle creatures, and nor should we be. Gross inequities and ecological warning signs continue to blink brighter and louder all around us. Once we find the source of our *inspiration*, it is important to understand how and where to channel it. At our best, human beings are artists driven to *expression* and a true sense of *aesthetics, beauty, harmony, and design*. We have a powerfully manipulative mixture of muscles, money, and motive at our disposal to shape the Earth, and should view our actions with an eye towards the beautiful rather than the bulldozer. As Holmgren (2002) proclaims, "designing is as natural as breathing, and like breathing, most of us can do it better" (p. 15). More than just visual beauty, aesthetics can offer a kaleidoscopic view of a more intimate way to be in awe of *and* participate in the world (Bignell, as cited in Stibbe, 2009).

As the cycle progresses, action inevitably transitions to *rest* and a value set that emphasizes *slowness, reflection, and gratitude*. Without an opportunity to recover from our efforts, to evaluate our successes and failures, and to appreciate those who have assisted us



along the journey, we are left with fatigue and even nihilism. Jones (2007) reminds us that "all work is half rest. Nature cannot thrive in full flower all the time, and nor can we. We need time to empty, to digest, to assimilate and be still" (p. 3). Unbounded growth is an immature mindset that assumes we can live infinitely on a finite planet; while *slowness*, *reflection*, and *gratitude* offer a realistic step along a path towards purposeful action (Heider, 2005).

At the end of the circle, we plant the seeds of new beginning, with the charge to ***repeat this cycle exponentially*** through the *empowerment* and *motivation* of others. I see value in the 'leader as host' metaphor, which assumes that people will eagerly contribute when they find meaning in their work (Wheatley and Frieze, 2010, p. 2). Our efforts can be multiplied on a global scale with a philosophy that is rooted in place, inspirational in practice, open to inter-relational and cosmic scales of connection, and grounded in care.

## MY LEARNING IN KEY LSE AREAS

Such a philosophy and pedagogy does not simply emerge from a textbook, as it has to be felt deeply, experimented with, and practiced communally. With gratitude for the opportunity, I focused my time as a student as one of great experimentation – allowing my head, hands, and heart to meld seamlessly together. I've had the opportunity to be more playful in my work with children, to be more of a role model in my work with adults, and to be more mindful in my time with Nature. I am more human ... and yet less bounded by this label.

More than any other learning outcome, and my goal of moving from the heated rhetoric of politics to the nurturing realm of education, was to develop a stronger **commitment to my own self-understanding**. To quote Gandhi, "the purpose of life is undoubtedly to know oneself. We cannot do it unless we learn to identify ourselves with all that live... The instrument of this knowledge is boundless, selfless service" (Desai, 1953, p.184).

While each course offered relevant material towards this goal, the most inspirational and memorable experiences connected our transformational readings to a particular locale. The course *Spiritual Leadership for Sustainable Change* included a ten-hour ‘spiritual retreat’ opportunity amidst the beautiful oak savannahs of the Sauvies Island Wildlife Refuge, offering an extended pause to reflect upon my own individuality and sense of purpose. Magnifying this notion of beauty exponentially, I joined members of my cohort on a study abroad trip to Nicaragua in the course *Regenerative Practices for Self and Community*, which situated me within an aesthetic cauldron of tropical beauty, artistic flair, and ecological harmony.

This experience sparked long, deeply-held reflections on my own sexual orientation, my identity in relation to others, and my emerging interest in natural design. Finally, in a *Special Projects* course, I submitted an article to *Orion Magazine* that explored the connections between place-based education and the concept of a flâneur – a literary figure experiencing the world through a slow, immersive, kaleidoscopic stroll (see Appendix A). This ability to play with identity, and connect it to an emergent teaching style, cemented my commitment to becoming a sustainability educator. Each of the experiences above has as its common denominator my emerging relationship to the Earth, aesthetics, place, and identity.

Moving outward, sustainability leaders step into a **systemic view of the world** by dismissing a mechanistic view of the universe – recognizing that our current challenges are holistic, interconnected, and require multiple perspectives to achieve consensus.

The course *Philosophy of Education* offered the ability to root my own learning within a theoretical framework spanning centuries of philosophical thought – revealing that my preferred teaching and learning style blends a humanistic philosophy of care and intrinsic motivation (Elias and Merriam, 2005) with a post-modern streak that questions societal

assumptions of perpetual advancement and reorients human beings in the natural world of interlocking relationships (Orr, 1992). Transitioning from theory to society, *Developmental Perspectives of Adult Learning* situated my own perspective within the panoply of class, gender, race, sexual orientation, and religious identities found on this planet. The course *Global Political Ecology*, in addition to a grounding in systems thinking, flexed my creative muscles by offering the chance to write a short story of hope surrounding the fictional notion of a pair of ecological lenses – leading to a contest-winning entry featured in publication and an opportunity to share my story on a local stage (see Appendix B).

In a world of almost 7 billion humans, as well as an infinite multitude of species beyond my own, it goes without saying that I am not the only voice that matters. Living in **biocultural relationship** on a shared planet is messy, laden with power and identity differentials, and weighted heavily by a past of colonization needing to be acknowledged and dismantled.

Long interested in the cultural history and architectural form of cities, I felt compelled to undertake an extensive project and presentation on Gruenewald's (2003) critical pedagogy of place in *Ecological and Cultural Foundations of Learning*. This project extended my interest in cities into a full-blown social justice cause through the twin goals of decolonization and reinhabitation. Transitioning from the human world to the natural one, *Sense of Place: Cultivating Relatedness through Forest Therapy* offered the opportunity to step outside of my species-specific concerns and connect with the natural world on a heart level – strengthening my presence, patience, and focus. I am inspired to apply this new practice to the urban realm.

Thus, a rooted identity, ecological lens, and inter-relational ethos all point towards the next step: purposeful action. Leaders need to utilize a **toolkit for sustainable change** in the external, public, and shared realms of existence.

Emerging from a career path and past that didn't focus on getting my hands dirty, I made sure to use every opportunity to expand my physical skillsets in service of the earth. My tenure within the LSE program involved three opportunities to explore garden education – volunteering with after-school youth through the organization Growing Gardens, working at a farm-focused summer camp with the Sauvie Island Center, and through an extensive internship with college students at the Learning Gardens Laboratory. Relatedly, I also took part in a farming internship amidst the bounty of harvest season at Zenger Farm, and have schlepped vegetables for more than a year for the ecologically-conscious Persephone Farm at the Portland Farmers Market. I now have a stronger association with the soil, know a bit more how to wield a tool, and can appreciate a truly fresh squash or head of radicchio more than I could have imagined two years ago.

But we wield as much power with our language as we do with our muscles. During a year-long Communications internship with the nonprofit Ecotrust, I recognized that effective storytelling, a winning narrative, and repeated success can influence extremely large amounts of capital. The delicate power of language was reinforced by many of our readings in *Ecological and Cultural Foundations of Learning*, including Kimmerer's (2013) advice to offer the living, non-human world the respect of kinship by consciously shifting our patterns of speech towards becoming "bilingual between the lexicon of science and the grammar of animacy" (p. 56). What a contrast! One opportunity focusing on how to influence capitalism with our language; the other, a lesson on nurturing a deeper relationship to the living world.

Be they the verbal, physical, professional, or even literal tools in this educational toolkit, I am grateful for the opportunity to refine each during my time as an LSE student.

## Step II: ACADEMIC SYNTHESIS

### INTRODUCTION

*"I began more seriously than ever to learn the names of things—the wild plants and animals, the natural processes, the local places—and to articulate my observations and memories. My language increased and strengthened, and sent my mind into the place like a live root system. And so what has become the usual order of things reversed itself with me; my mind became the root of my life rather than its sublimation. I came to see myself growing out of the earth like the other native animals and plants. I saw my body as brief coherences and articulations of the energy of the place, which would fall back into the earth like leaves in the autumn."*

-Wendell Berry, *The Art of the Commonplace* (Berry & Wirzba, 2002)

In just 117 graceful words, author Wendell Berry encapsulates the sustainability leader I envision myself becoming: his analogies root us into the cycles and subtle shifts of the seasons. His words offer respect and species equity to our non-human kin. His surroundings have inspired a Naturalist's interest in observing, recognizing, and interacting with our local flora and fauna. And most importantly, his lilting language demonstrates that he is simply a messenger, an advocate, and a mammalian embodiment of his place rather than its conqueror. Combined, Berry effuses a leader who is consciously rooted to the land, who is vital and alive, who knows what he loves, where he belongs, and where he comes from (Jones, 2007, p. 3).

Yet Berry is a farmer with a large piece of property in the verdant Kentucky countryside. It shouldn't come as a surprise that he has formed an intimate connection with his land and a deep, place-based consciousness that has motivated him to environmental activism and a long career of fiction and poetry. And for millennia before their forced removal,

indigenous communities lived in such an interconnected manner with this land that their relationship would probably be unrecognizable to our modern consumptive lifestyle.

What about the 81% of Americans who live in cities, a percentage that increases with each year? (“Measuring America: Our Changing Landscape,” 2016). We are increasingly an urban people, and unlike Berry, only about 1.5% of the nation's population works in the agriculture sector (“Bureau of Labor Statistics: Employment by Major Industry Sector,” n.d.). Less than 60% of urban Americans own a home – a statistic that is decreasing as people continue to move to cities and must rent due to the high cost of living (Choi, Zhu, Goodman, Ganesh & Storchak, 2018). Without a yard to nurture, greenspace access should be prioritized in urban planning decisions – yet many of the fastest growing cities in America have less than 50% of their population that can walk to a park within a half of a mile of their house (Trust for Public Land, 2016). While Portland continues to build parks, our region is not exempt from the pressures of growth. From 2010 to 2017, the city grew by 11%, and has a homeownership rate lower than the national average (“U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Portland, Oregon”).

While farming, owning a piece of property on which to garden, or having access to a park or natural area might all offer ideal scenarios for nurturing an ecological consciousness, our planet is increasingly urban, interconnected, and anthropocentric in nature (Buck, 2015; Capra, 2002; “Measuring America: Our Changing Landscape,” 2016). If we are to offer our citizens an opportunity to cherish the Earth before asking them to protect it (Sobel, 1998), then sustainability educators should focus on building a stronger relationship to our increasingly urban, public realm in place-based and environmental education. And what could be more urbane and accessible than a sidewalk? With a unique shift of perspective, it is the truest form of popular education: often available, free, and specifically designed to be

explored. While walking, one is fully encompassed in an unending diversity of topics: ecology, culture, politics, architecture. We begin to recognize how humans – rich, poor, powerful or oppressed – express their values through the public realm. What an educational opportunity!

If our job as educators is done well, our students will grow into engaged citizens and join the multitude of diverse groups creating a more just world by working collaboratively to solve extremely complex problems (Hawken, 2008). And yet the magnitude of these challenges are evoking an increasingly toxic miasma of partisanship, eco-paralysis, and eco-anxiety in our citizenry (Albrecht, 2011). Citizens are not engaged or motivated by ecological challenges because they struggle to identify with our catastrophic relationship to nature in this increasingly urban, anthropocentric, and climactically-fraught modern era (Buck, 2015). Rather than focus solely on natural areas as a pathway to ecological consciousness and action, I propose that sustainability educators can inspire and motivate citizens through a “Pedestrian Pedagogy of Place” that brings wonder and enchantment into our urban public realm.

## **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

Much like the many meandering walks that have inspired this Comprehensive paper, this literature review will wind through and connect many overlapping issues: a problem section that highlights the dominant paradigms surrounding modern education and our society’s general sense of placelessness. It will continue with an overview of sustainability education and place-based education, and then highlight a solution focusing on the need for a slow, enchanted Pedestrian Pedagogy of Place, before concluding with an explanation of how this concept can nurture an ecological consciousness and the motivation to solve our most critical challenges. The body of work that follows is not so much about how or where to walk, but rather about building the case for recognizing the pedestrian experience and public realm as part of the emerging field of sustainability education.

## **DOMINANT PARADIGMS IN EDUCATION**

The list of challenges the next generation faces is utterly immense in scope: climate change, biodiversity and species loss, unsustainable population increase, natural resource decline, seemingly perpetual violence, and intractable poverty (Macy and Johnstone, 2012; Orr, 1992; Wheatley, 2017). Climate change discourse is increasingly accepted as factual (Saad, 2017) but with proposed solutions that polarize constituencies, offer incremental solutions that only reinforce reductionist, mechanistic, and industrial frameworks guiding modern capitalism, and that simply perpetuate our unsustainable existence (Hay, 2010; Williams and Brown, 2012). As Meadows (2005) explains, “we can’t find a proper, sustainable relationship to nature, each other, or the institutions we create, if we try to do it from the role of omniscient conqueror” (p. 3). From vast international policy commitments that countries have little incentive to follow through on (Wheatley, 2017), to nebulous parts-per-million carbon reduction strategies, to simplistic personal solutions like taking shorter showers and installing CFL lightbulbs – such detached solutions may feel like action, but more often lead to paralysis and cynicism about the reality of transitioning towards sustainability if citizens do not feel empowered to know how to be change agents (Albrecht, 2011; Burns, 2011).

Peet, Robbins & Watts (2011) explain that “understanding and resisting the way critical environmental problems are produced and promulgated in global capitalism depends on knowing and grappling with how people internalize, narrate, and explain the world around them” (p. 41). Thus, challenging dominant systems – even those like science and education which are increasingly under the microscope for political reasons -- can be intellectually and ideologically discomfiting, but important. As Furman and Gruenewald (2004) note, “Questioning assumptions about progress is an especially relevant exercise for educational



leaders, whose roles often demand that they demonstrate progress and improvement in many areas" (p. 61). In that vein, educators have the responsibility to analyze dominant paradigms, recognizing that many are cultural in nature and stem from an underlying root metaphor of the universe as an inert machine rather than a living system (Bowers, 1999; Capra 2002).

Modern schooling began to take shape in the 19th century as the nation slowly transitioned from an agrarian to an urban culture. In response to this growing capitalistic society, Westernized educational systems began to mirror the efficiency of a factory, engaging students through the transmission of standardized content regardless of local place or culture (Freire, 1970; Sterling, 2001; Williams and Brown, 2012). Resembling an assembly line, teachers were expected to deposit knowledge into students as they sat passively awaiting instruction, all with the underlying goal to perpetuate an industrialized workforce (Freire; Sterling). This one-size fits all standard of education disregards alternative perspectives (Burns, 2011), decontextualizes education from local place or culture, reinforces individualism, and results in a loss of curiosity and wonder (Williams and Brown).

These crises stem from a failure of our educational systems to situate human beings in a natural world full of interlocking relationships (Orr, 1992), charging society to ask what we should be educating the next generation for rather than about (Sterling, 2001), and actively dismantling the "imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" that created these ecological and social crises in the first place (hooks, 1994). This decontextualization of learning has parallels in the public realm, manifesting as a globalized economy through our suburbanized architecture and sprawling development patterns. Orr explains that "our lives are lived amidst the architectural expression of displacement: the shopping mall, apartment, neon strip, freeway, glass office tower, and homogenized development—none of which

encourages much sense of rootedness, responsibility, and belonging" (as cited in Stone and Barlow, 2015, p. 93). This disconnection from place is reflected in textbooks that emphasize learning about faraway lands rather than the natural, cultural, and ecological history of one's local place (Sobel, 1996).

The result is an educational system that sows the seeds for an economy built on the need for perpetual growth; leaving its inhabitants with little opportunity to rest, integrate, or redirect. We become hyper-focused, fail to recognize looming disasters, and postpone our problems for the next generation to solve (Macy and Johnstone, 2012). Narrowing our scope to the present moment, we ignore our ancestors and future generations; ultimately diminishing the collective purpose and deeper meaning of our actions (Macy and Johnstone, 2012). A feedback loop occurs: fast knowledge emerges in our educational institutions, which prioritizes utility over contemplation and information acquisition over wisdom, all while failing to account for the social and ecological costs that inevitably will arise (Orr, 2011).

Without the time, access, or an educational paradigm that allows a connection with our places, we are left with digitally-mediated narratives about our relationship with the Earth: human beings as detached, dull, and disengaged from the planet (Buck, 2015), with cities that are safe, predictable, and boring (Williams and Brown, 2012), and driven by technology, capitalism, and consumerism (Szerszynski, 2012). This cries out for a new story (Eisenstein, 2013), Parker Palmer's (2007) advice to put on a new lens of the world, and Starhawk's (2004) teachings about magic that makes us aware that we are viewing reality through a specific frame – in this case, an unmotivating tale of doom and gloom.

## **SUSTAINABILITY EDUCATION AS AN EMERGING LENS**

Educators have an opportunity to shift these unsustainable dominant paradigms by transitioning from a “homogenized, standardized, and technologized” worldview (Sterling, 2001) to an ecological worldview that promotes a style of learning that is place-based, process-oriented, rhythmic, transformative, relational, and intrinsically-motivating (Burns, 2011; Orr, 1992; Wheatley and Frieze, 2010; Williams and Brown, 2012). This shift is reflective in the growing interest in sustainability education, a holistic discipline that stresses “integrating and balancing process (what education is) with purpose (what education is for), so that they are mutually informing and enhancing” (Sterling, 2001, p. 26). The field moves beyond simply identifying or ‘solving’ ecological problems and recognizes that “at heart, sustainability is a social, psychological, and political problem” (Hemenway, 2015, p. 204), creating space for both personal and collective transformation to occur (Burns, 2011).

Rather than offer prescriptive solutions to these challenges, sustainability educators are leaders that inherently project a spirit of lifelong inquiry and learning (Ferdig, 2007), create opportunities for students to generate their own answers, and then trust that they will contribute when they find meaning in their work (Wheatley and Frieze, 2010, p. 2). These components of sustainability education – 1) place-based, 2) process-oriented, 3) rhythmic, 4) transformative, 5) relational, and 6) intrinsically-motivating – offers a lens of which to create a leadership philosophy that recontextualizes learning by recognizing the public realm as an educational opportunity: a Pedestrian Pedagogy of Place. The following sections will build a case for this pedagogy through the six components listed above.

## PLACE-BASED: SENSE OF PLACE IN OUR EDUCATIONAL SYSTEMS

Sustainability education not only refocuses the content and process of education, it *roots learning within the context of one's place* (Burns, 2011), which “clarifies the links between knowledge and its application ... because it can be seen right here and right now, it inspires active responsibility to preserve the integrity of this particular place and by extension all other places” (Williams and Brown, 2012, p. 73). Whether it be the loamy soil in your backyard, Portland’s Pioneer Square, or the sizzling Sahara Desert, all places are endlessly made and remade due to their “unwindable spiral of material form and interpretative understandings or experiences” (Gieryn, 2000, p. 471). Places are the intersection of our individual interactions and memories coming together into a collective achievement (Seltzer, as cited in Houck and Cody, 2000, p. 11).

This collective achievement of unique individualities expressed onto the public realm arises as a new, felt sense – a sense of place (Abrams, 1996; Burns, 2011). Rather than simply focusing on the content of our surroundings, this new sense becomes a sort of ‘humanistic geography’ that attempts to define our *relationship* to them (Tuan, 1977). Contrary to the rigid divisions of subjects within standardized education, this felt sense is thus an ongoing conversation based on a relationship between subject and place over a given period of time, encompassing a transdisciplinary and synthetic blend of geography, history, seasonal changes, ecology, culture (Semken, 2012; Williams and Brown, 2012, p. 61).

Since time immemorial, indigenous cultures have rooted their learning within place, though models of place-based education only came into existence as the genesis of the environmental movement began around the 1970s (Semken and Brandt, 2010, p. 291). Place-based education springs from the experiential educational philosophy of Dewey (1916),

the liberatory pedagogy of Freire (1970), and continues today with Sobel's (1998) emphasis on map-based learning at each level of academic development.

Place-based education is not without critique, often characterized as being too White, rural, ecological, and without a critical lens (Gruenewald, 2003). Beyond our own individual meanings attached to a place, educators must recognize the historical injustices that have occurred over time, many of which involve oppression against communities of color and the Earth itself. As Gruenewald notes, this 'critical pedagogy of place' aims to "identify, recover, and create material spaces and places that teach us how to live well in our total environments (reinhabitation); and identify and change ways of thinking that injure and exploit other people and places (decolonization)" (p 319). Exemplifying this dilemma, the city of Portland has received plaudits for its livability, urban quirkiness, and identifiable sense of place, but gentrification has caused many of the city's African American residents to leave their traditional neighborhoods due to economic and cultural pressure (Fowler and Derrick, 2018).

I will add my own criticism to this list: the literature surrounding place-based education still focuses heavily on siting this learning opportunity in a specific place: a creek, a garden, a forest, a fish hatchery, a historical society, etc. (Sobel, 1996; Stone as cited in Stone and Barlow, 2005; Williams and Brown, 2012). Each offers students a much-needed opportunity to learn in more natural settings, and yet these trips often ignore urban areas – or when they do visit them, will do so through a specific activity, such as community service or riding public transportation, and in a specific locale, such as going to an 'ethnic neighborhood' (Sobel, 1996, p. 21). Portland's signature place-based education school, The Cottonwood School of Civics and Science, exemplifies this trend. It lists on its website more than 20 different locations that students will be visiting this year, such as a nearby community garden,

a reservoir, the city's Art Museum, and the local Naturopathic University ("Stories from the Field - The Cottonwood School of Civics & Science"). Each of these is a specific place in and of itself and often to engage in a specific, time-limited function. Why should this matter?

## **PROCESS-ORIENTED: A LIVING PROCESSES PARADIGM**

Through its focus on pedagogical design (Baumgartner, 2001; Burns, 2011; Williams and Brown, 2012) or styles of leadership (Heider, 1985; Wheatley & Frieze, 2010), *sustainability education prioritizes process* rather than outcomes, such that the entire field is rooted in a living processes paradigm (Burns, Vaught & Bauman, 2015). Place-limited and time-limited learning opportunities, while often necessary within our modern systems, still work to reinforce dominant paradigms of education. Even as place-based education has encouraged the field to expand outside the four walls of the classroom (Sobel, 1996), it can still root learning in a singular event or location, reifying education as a temporary experience rather than a participatory, lifelong lens of which to engage the world.

I propose that sustainability educators radically expand the boundaries of place-based education in three ways: focusing on the journey of place via the sidewalk, fostering a slow and self-directed style of learning to emerge, and working to re-enchant our anthropocentric, urban places. Combined, this Pedestrian Pedagogy of Place will help learners recognize the totality of their lives as educational vignettes, work to heal the increasing nature/human divide, and generate intrinsic motivation to solve our most critical ecological and social crisis.

## Step III: A PEDESTRIAN PEDAGOGY OF PLACE

### INTRODUCTION

David Orr asks us to ponder, “What is the proper balance between mobility and rootedness?” (as cited in Stone and Barlow, 2015, p. 94). This question takes on deeper resonance in an era where a greater proportion of our lives are lived in the digital realm.

The call to expand the location of learning beyond a singular place and time comes from a truly embodied, felt experience of crisscrossing many cities by foot. Strolling casually but intentionally, I have found myself overwhelmed and humbled by the vast diversity of sensory experiences offered in our complex, multi-layered urban areas. Each yard and streetscape offers an interlocking yet individual diversity of living and non-living kin of which to explore. As Aldo Leopold (1949) beckons, “mysterious and little-known organisms live within walking distance of where you sit. Splendor awaits in minute proportions” (p. 139). This outdoor classroom is located just beyond the four walls of my own home – requiring only an undivided attention, a pair of shoes, and gear relative to the weather's daily brew.

Drawn in ever deeper by this relationship to place, I've come to identify emotionally with it, feeling a rollercoaster of aesthetic pain and pleasure with each city block I traverse. This collective feeling of place connects me to my neighbors, my city, and my bioregion – nurturing a new form of communal identification, and motivating me to labor on its behalf. Yet in a world on hyper-speed, I get the sense that most people don't recognize how such a simple practice can encourage a deeper relationship with both our individualized selves and our larger eco-selves. As I've progressed down my path as an educator, I've felt compelled to

understand how I can nurture this broader place-based consciousness in others while also deepening my own practice. Hence the need for a Pedestrian Pedagogy of Place: creating space for sustainability education lens to emerge from a simple stroll throughout one's place.

## **WALKING WITH WIDER AWARENESS**

From the stand point of community health, urban design, and greenhouse gas reduction, the literature on sustainable cities has long advocated for the transition of a car-centric to pedestrian and transit-oriented society (Hemenway, 2015). Yet until recently, most research surrounding pedestrian policy centered on a simple understanding of walking as a means of getting from one place to another, lacking information on the context in which walking takes place and the meaning-making that occurs during that period (Middleton, 2010). In a word, it lacks relationship. This deficiency calls for a sustainability educator's lens of the experience of walking, recognizing that our bodies are the first true units of localism (Walla, 2009), and reorienting the relationship of pedestrian and place into an interconnected, deeply felt experience (Hay, 2010). As Hubbard (2006) notes, "we do not have to think about the way we move through urban space: our body feels its way" (p. 119). This 'feeling' begins to reawaken and reestablish our relationship to place.

The practice and pedagogy of walking begins with increasing our awareness and relationships with these spaces, not simply zooming through an area with headphones in and eyes down upon a screen. The emerging discipline of forest therapy, a practice that focuses on spending time in nature in a way that encourages healing encounters, offers one strategy for how to reconnect with these public spaces. Highlighting the principles and values of this emerging field, The Association of Nature and Forest Therapy explains:



This requires mindfully moving through the landscape in ways that cultivate presence, opening all the senses, and actively communicating with the land... Each invitation is crafted to help participants slow down and open our senses, giving the forest access to our emotional, physical, psychological, and spiritual being. As we do this, we begin to perceive more deeply the nuances of the constant stream of communications rampant in any natural setting. We learn to let the land and its messages penetrate into our minds and hearts more deeply (Association of Nature and Forest Therapy, n.d.).

Can we offer our full beings to the messy, gritty complexity of urban areas as well? With intentionality, practice, and patience, these same principles can be applied in any setting – recognizing the overlapping messages arising from our metropolitan kin, be they living, human-engineered, or symbolic. Living beings are present whether we engage them or not.

## **RHYTHMIC: ALLOWING TIME FOR SENSORY LEARNING TO EMERGE**

Rather than a linear discipline, *sustainability education is cyclical and in tune with the rhythm and flows of life* (Williams and Brown, 2012). Reframing our guiding narrative away from a mechanistic clock to a living system (Capra, 2002), we recognize “existence as a participatory process, repeatedly practiced and played out through the flows of time” (Kumar, 2004). The act of walking fixes learning into that slow, steady rhythm.

Williams and Brown (2012) bring in this dimension of time to pedestrianism by noting that “walking the neighborhood...critically awakens students to what is alive in their community here and now” (p 74). Such an emphasis on the present moment reinforces the need for a slow, ambling pedagogy to truly learn from our surroundings: one can drive through the city and its neighborhoods far faster than can be walked, but a hermetically

sealed vehicle offers only a visual experience of the public realm rather than an opportunity for an immersive, sensory understanding. As Kohr (1980) notes, “the only way that can induce us to reduce our speed of movements is a return to a spatially more contracted, leisurely, and largely pedestrian mode of life” (p. 58). Strolling, sauntering, moseying, and meandering: each describes a speed of movement that encourages active contemplation.

So as not to perpetuate a colonizing mindset, truly knowing a place and knowing when to act requires dwelling within that place for an extended period of time (Gruenewald, 2003; Williams and Brown, 2012). In the case of a garden, that may be a full seasonal cycle (Hemenway, 2015) or perhaps an entire generation for an urban neighborhood. Receiving the overlapping layers of meaning takes more than a fleeting moment to understand and encourages a slow pedagogy that roots learning into the body (Burns, 2015). Tooth and Renshaw (2009) describe a slow pedagogy as “creating authentic educational experiences that move us into a deeply reflective space where we not only focus on the ‘learning mind’ but also on the ‘sensuous physicality of the body’ as we make new meaning in the world” (p. 98-99). Full sensory learning only works when at a pace appropriate to engage each of them.

This approach disregards a purely mental and intellectual relationship, in return for a physical, sensorial, even animalistic relationship to our place (Abrams, 1996; Walla, 2009). By connecting slowness with the pleasure of our senses, we get savoring. “Savoring is a variation on mindfulness. When we savor, there's the intention to enter fully into the experience, rather than cling to it or drag it out” (Germer, 2009, p. 115). Learning is joyful, light, and self-directed in this state – setting the stage for a deeper, transformative educational experience to occur.

## TRANSFORMATIVE: RE-ENCHANTING OUR URBAN PUBLIC REALM

Rather than transmissive education that assumes passive learners, *sustainability education is transformative* in nature by changing how we learn through the meaning-making process (Baumgartner, 2001; Moore, 2005). How can we expect humans to remain motivated to heal the earth if they view themselves and their actions as a cancer upon it? (Sobel, 1996). To be effective in an urbanizing world, educators need to transform and re-story our increasingly distant relationship to anthropocentric expressions of nature in the public realm.

Buck (2015) refers to this re-storying as enchantment, noting that it can “enable the passion, care, revulsion, networks, sense of place, relationships, and so on that help bring about these socioecological transformations, offering greater momentum for mobilization than pure critique” (p. 372). Enchantment means to charm, bewitch, or bring wonder to, and has its roots in the Latin word *incantare*, which means ‘to sing.’ This ‘singing’ is a way to express and deepen our engagement with the natural and non-natural world of places, things, and people (Pyry, 2016). Williams and Brown (2012) explain that “wonder has received less attention in pedagogy since the concept is more elusive and viewed as not results-oriented” (p. 76), making its inclusion into a new educational paradigm all the more important.

Enchantment is not simply romanticization, or an ignorance of the world’s problems, but rather, a refocusing of attention upon them. As Buck (2015) notes, “the sense of wonder evoked in encounters can lead to an ethic of care and tenderness — or it can lead to revulsion and perhaps action. These are not mutually exclusive directions” (p. 372). It involves living in a perpetual state of curiosity, always asking questions, and craving to know how something came to be (Lappe, 2011).

Extending this sense of curiosity into the everyday, mundane urban realm helps learners recognize that they are not separate from the natural world. Bennett (2011) asks, “Why must nature be the exclusive source of enchantment? Can’t — don’t — numerous human artifacts also fascinate and inspire?” (p. 91). Healing the emerging nature/human and nature/urban split with a sustainability education lens would work to enchant humans-within-nature (Buck, 2015), reframing the relationship as co-creators of this special place.

## **RELATIONAL: DEVELOPING AN ECO-CONSCIOUSNESS**

Thus, *sustainability education is relational*. Much like how preschoolers on the Ladybug Walk lose their individual identities when enraptured in place, these concepts of wonder and enchantment can allow a similar identity merger with our Earth bodies to occur.

Bringing more intention and sensory awareness to our walking throughout the city, we begin to recognize and remember the species and places of which we coexist: the stunning purple beech tree on the corner; the fragrant, overgrown lavender bush a few blocks away; the way the neighborhood litter always seems to blow into that one specific lot. Eventually, we form relationships with these creatures and spaces — either enchanted by their presence or repulsed by the embodiment of a space left behind by capitalism and globalization. After repeated interactions and the cycles of the seasons, a sense of feeling and responsibility arises, and the individual grip of self-consciousness loosens a bit. In this way, we “no longer see the world around us as a set of isolated mechanical objects, but as a unified field of experiencing subjects” (Harding, as cited in Stibbe, 2009, pg. 92), thereby identifying with our larger eco-selves with whom we share the Earth (Hay, 2010).

In this felt, relational world, "we cannot assume what 'self' is without examining the ways in which self is defined by the social environment within which the individual is embedded" (Zaytoun, 2005, p.79). Rather than a fixed identity, the self is always in constant construction (Danvers, as cited in Stibbe, 2009, p. 188), with education and self-reflection serving as a main tool for this growth (Tennant & Pogson, 1995, p. 200). This blending of identity severs the notion of a self/other split and shines a mirror on the world, highlighting that "to work on the self, it is necessary to work in the world, and to work effectively in the world, it is necessary to work on the self" (Eisentein, 2013, p. 87). Thus, we no longer have to rely only on our individualized selves, and can choose where we place our consciousness: the moments when it is appropriate to identify with 'Gaia' and when it is appropriate to identify with 'self,' so as to "unleash the tremendously powerful feelings of energy and dedication that lead us spontaneously into right action" (Harding, as cited in Stibbe, 2009, p. 93).

## **INTRINSIC MOTIVATION: RECOGNIZING WHEN TO ACT**

In this way, *sustainability education becomes intrinsically-motivating*. As our individual identities relax into an eco-consciousness, citizens will feel inherently compelled to act on behalf of the Earth, regardless of the magnitude and scale of our ecological and social challenges. We acknowledge the task ahead no longer as work or a burden, but as a duty and a responsibility, allowing work to flow through us (Kumar, 2004, p. 74). As Walla (2009) explains, "the line is blurred between work and play, between action and activism, between life and art" (p. 231). Regardless of status or power, sustainability educators recognize that each person has a unique skill to offer in this coming age of reunion (Eisenstein, 2013). As Wheatley and Frieze (2010) note, good leaders "trust in other people's creativity and

commitment to get the work done. They know that other people, no matter where they are in the organizational hierarchy, can be as motivated and as creative as the leader, given the right invitation” (p. 2). With humility, sustainability leaders hold the keys to this awesome power.

In short, a Pedestrian Pedagogy of Place can offer one lens of which to reorient our relationship to nature and each other in the increasingly anthropocentric public realm. With an emphasis on process and relationship to place, sustainability educators work to expand the location of education into the entirety of the public realm, and by extension, the ‘in-between’ moments of our lives. This can be performed, step-by-step, through the daily mindful practice of walking one’s neighborhood – allowing a slower, deeper sensory awareness to arise that reveals an enchanting mish-mash of animate place to envelop our being. Eventually, this interconnected relationship loosens our construction of self, prompting a stronger eco-consciousness with the beautiful multitude of lives unlike our own, and an intrinsic motivation to lead on our most challenging ecological and social challenges. Most importantly for our time-and-energy-deficient culture, this educational opportunity can be found just beyond one’s home and requires only a reframed lens of which to orient with the world.

## Step IV: CONCLUSION

### CHALLENGES TO IMPLEMENTATION

I don't assume that ditching an economic view of the world in favor of a slow saunter through the public realm will be easy. Both ends of the political spectrum could take issue with this framework, because as Peet et al. (2011) notes, "the lens through which environmental problems are constituted and projected inevitably assigns specific causations and empowers and disempowers different actors" (p. 37). This work is no different.

One of the largest barriers is the most obvious: recognizing the sidewalk and public realm as a sustainability education opportunity only works if cities are walkable. With a connective street grid and miles of low-traffic greenways, many neighborhoods in Portland are friendly to the pedestrian — and yet most metropolitan areas were built after the advent of the car, making walking difficult and sidewalk access unreliable. Even if a community has sidewalks, many less densely urbanized areas have homogenous, sprawling development unidentifiable from its immediate surroundings. Learning from these environs would be difficult without cultural or even material complexity and diversity. And while cities are increasingly working to accommodate citizens with disabilities (Quednau, 2018), even the City of Portland recently settled a lawsuit for failing to keep their sidewalks and crosswalks up to 'Americans with Disabilities Act' standards (Friedman, 2018).

Safety concerns could offer another barrier in adopting a Pedestrian Pedagogy of Place. Our public realm is accessible to all walks of life, and thus offers a refuge to those left furthest behind by capitalism's excesses. In this way, increased camping in the public right-of-way of late has spurred political outrage, as has the garbage and other paraphernalia that has

accompanied it. Many communities might also view the public realm with suspicion: people of color may not feel comfortable in a variety of urban settings, fearful that they would be subject to racial bias or increased police scrutiny. Slowly strolling a neighborhood as a person of color could raise unwarranted suspicions from those accustomed to a more homogeneous racial makeup of their communities. Finally, the fervor surrounding private property rights in some circles could dampen enthusiasm for a more expansive, relational view of the public realm.

Each of the concerns above is valid, currently being addressed in their own unique ways by millions of citizens working towards the common good (Hawken, 2008), and reflective of how sustainability education does not attempt to offer one-size-fits-all solutions to global-scale problems (Orr, 2011). Challenges aside, it is important to remain engaged in the political realm without getting paralyzed by pushback, recognizing that social conflict and partisanship stands as one of the largest sources of burnout in ecological and social movements (Walla, 2009, p. 229). I recognize that this pedagogy is just one of many that can cultivate a deeper presence with our increasingly anthropocentric expressions of nature.

## **A COMMITMENT TO SELF-UNDERSTANDING: MY OWN POSITIONALITY**

As Gruenewald (2003) notes, “people must be challenged to reflect on their own concrete situationality in a way that explores the complex interrelationships between cultural and ecological environments” (p. 314). Before offering solutions to our challenges, effective educators should take the opportunity to contemplate their own positionality, recognize the unique lens that they bring to a setting, and even share areas of vulnerability (hooks, 1994).

In this way, I identify as White, male, gay, college-educated, and a transplant from another part of the country. Each of these identities has a set of privileges attached to it. I also reside in an historically African-American neighborhood, live in an old Victorian home, and



am working in a variety of efforts towards neighborhood and city revitalization. In short, I strongly embody a stereotype of a gentrifier — an issue that has caused me shame in the past.

It is also important to study the lens that I bring to my work. As an unmarried, part-time employee without a car, house, dependents, or investments, I often don't need to think about the necessity of earning money in the same way that those who have these items do. My many work and extra-curricular commitments are more likely to be educational in nature rather than with the intent to earn. Essentially, my worldview is not economic, an immense privilege in a world where many are simply trying to feed their families and navigate capitalism's pitfalls. With this in mind, my hope is to guide citizens to recognize "sustainability as a frame of mind with a focus on human flourishing" (Bonnett, as cited in Stevenson, 2006, p. 10), because "if we value ourselves, then we will value that which we believe supports us" (Stevenson, 2006, p. 10). Which is all to say: I am working to bring a kaleidoscopic lens of care, beauty, and wonder to my locale, but do not expect this view will be easily adopted by the broader populace when more urgent problems could take precedence.

## **WHERE CAN THIS WORK BE IMPLEMENTED?**

Each day, I get the pleasure of teaching on foot and in place in my current role as a Naturalist at Portland Parks' Environmental Education division. My work involves guiding students from pre-school to middle school age on field trips and exploratory walks throughout many of Portland's roughly 146 parks – teaching ecology lessons and working to evoke a sense of place in an increasingly digital age. As my time in LSE is winding down, what's next for my educational journey? How can I apply this emerging philosophy to my future career path? I have a variety of ideas, each at a different scale of implementation.

To begin, I intend to immerse myself further in the literature and network of place-based education, learning how to meld this pedagogy with established practice. I have a meeting scheduled with the Place-Based Education Director at The Cottonwood School and hope this can be the launch of a productive relationship, both personally and professionally.

I also hope to encourage my friends and colleagues in the Urban Forestry division of Parks and Recreation to add an educational lens to their work by including ecological, cultural, and historical information in their street tree plantings — many of which are in the public right-of-way. Governments have the financial backing and convening power to create holistic, artistic signage in their plantings that can deepen a sense of place and enliven our public realm.

My bureau is not the only that hosts an educational program — the City's Bureau of Environmental Services holds a Clean Rivers Education program, teaching watershed health at sites across the city. And other city bureaus? Motivated to integrate this Pedestrian Pedagogy of Place into my passion for public service, I am intrigued by how this lens could be applied as an educational program within the Bureau of Transportation. Even though they offer a number of courses, the focus is almost solely on safety and rule-following according to your chosen mode of transportation. What could an interpretive program look like that isn't solely about avoiding accidents? Sustainability educators have the skillsets to inspire inclusive, holistic ways of being that can heal our transactionary relationship with these public spaces.

Stepping out from the public realm to the private, I call on homeowners to recognize what an amazing opportunity they have to be creative placemakers by exciting and educating their fellow citizens through their own parking strip. The space in between the sidewalk and the street is publicly owned and privately managed — a perfect analogy for how we can coexist as an increasingly urban society. Signage, art, cultural expression, and miniature

habitats: each has the ability to briefly re-root us into the present moment, evoke a sense of place, and temporarily transform our individualized consciousness into a unified sense of being.

Finally, echoing my goal of lifelong learning and inspiration, I hope to embody this pedagogy by bringing deeper awareness to my many walks throughout the city and allowing their educational potential to emerge through my thoughts, words, and actions.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

With unimaginable challenges awaiting our current and future generations, this foray into a new pedagogy may seem quaint, trivial, or even a diversion from more immediate crises at hand. And yet, how we live in relationship with our underappreciated public spaces and the more mundane moments of daily existence becomes representative of a much larger issue: our relationship to life itself. In this way, the field of sustainability education stands as more than a field of practice — it offers an holistic lens of which to continually renegotiate our relationship to the paradoxical interconnectivities and individualities of the modern world.

As the planet becomes more populated and digitally-tethered, the very notions of time and space are increasingly understood to be in short supply, and thus recognized as sacred. Educators have the responsibility to nurture an educational, philosophical, and spiritual paradigm that mirrors this emerging reality through artistic, animate, and life-affirming expressions in the public realm. With one foot in front of the other, this Pedestrian Pedagogy of Place serves as a unifying lens of which to do so, creating life-long learners who are “informed, aware, realistic, courageous, and personally hopeful in ways that genuinely attract others to the business of living collaboratively” (Ferdig, 2007, p. 32). After two and a half years in the LSE program, thirteen courses, three internships, and two jobs later, I feel immensely grateful to consider myself as one of them.

## Step V: REFERENCES AND APPENDICES

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## APPENDIX A:

*At the early stages of my journey as an LSE student, I submitted an article to Orion Magazine as part of a Special Projects class. I offered this piece as an opportunity to reflect upon my newfound career path as an educator and resolve lingering internal struggles with identity, sexual orientation, and motivation. Now a year and a half later, the story that follows reads as the literary, creative expression of the Pedestrian Pedagogy of Place that my Comps project attempts to address academically. While ultimately not published, the drafting of this piece paved the way in developing an overarching educational and leadership philosophy. Due to its submission as a magazine piece, it will not be sourced in the same manner as the previous pages.*

# COMING OUT AS A FLÂNEUR

## Re-storying an Historic Lens for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

FROM CYBER-SCHOOLING AND MASSIVE ONLINE OPEN COURSES, to charter schooling and the Common Core, the 21<sup>st</sup> century has seen an explosion of new technologies and metrics for how we educate our citizenry. But as with many facets of modernity at hyper-speed, sometimes it is wise to step back and reflect upon how human beings have learned throughout much of our evolutionary history: with our own two feet.

Education hasn't always required the latest technology to be relevant, let alone a report card, a stack of dusty books, or a little red schoolhouse. Rather, a pair of eyes, ten toes, and the absence of a watch can be all that is required to stumble upon a particularly transformative learning opportunity.

By engaging each of the senses on a leisurely stroll, whether seeing and smelling or hearing and holding, citizens as students of the world are more apt to notice how many small

educational vignettes are actually encountered on an average day. This is education as active experience rather than passive consumption — a form of mobile learning that doesn't involve a memorization of subjects as much as a recognition of the connections between them.

Having crisscrossed many cities by foot at an ambling pace, I've found myself learning about topics as diverse as architecture, botany, climatology, kinesiology and human nature – and absorbing far more than a book could hope to teach me. This way of thinking isn't new, as the field of experiential and place-based education has been around for decades. Its founders deserve kudos for bringing a more direct, sensory approach to learning into the mainstream.

Children are especially adept at this type of learning — complete immersion into their environment, often by adopting and playing with different identities. In shifting their sense of self, say to a superhero, doctor, or giraffe, they fully embody their subject and learn through play and discovery. A child begins to think *like* a giraffe rather than think like a child who is thinking *about* a giraffe. This is education through curiosity and inspiration rather than through information transfer of teacher to student. It allows a freedom to explore and generate motivation for why we even want to learn in the first place.

In that spirit of play and identity shifting, I invite you to lace up your mental sneakers, and join me on a written walk as we explore how an obscure 19<sup>th</sup>-century French literary figure can offer a more animating lens of care to this strange and beautiful world we live in.

*“Knowledge of a place — where you are and where you come from — is intertwined with knowledge of who you are. Landscape, in other words, shapes mindscape.” – David W. Orr*

POET CHARLES BAUDELAIRE REFERRED TO HIM as a “kaleidoscope gifted with consciousness” and a “botanist of the sidewalk” while novelist Honoré de Balzac conjured

up his sensory activity as “gastronomy of the eye.” Philosopher Walter Benjamin paints a more noir image, detailing how “the crowd was the veil from behind which the familiar city as phantasmagoria beckoned.”

This peculiar figure is no synesthetic superhero, but rather, a 19<sup>th</sup>-century literary French archetype called a *flâneur*. The concept of a *flâneur* has rich connotations, both positive and negative, and emerged into public consciousness just as modern cities began taking shape – specifically the meandering streets of Paris.

As these burgeoning metropolises began to install modern sewer systems, gas lamps, and paved streets, citizens were more apt to mill about and explore the public realm that once was smelly, dark, and muddy. Parisian boulevards were erected under Baron Haussmann, offering vast view sheds ripe for pondering. Covered arcades began to pop up, allowing people to wander and gawk at a merchant's wares even when the weather was less than ideal.

Thus, to *flâneur* is to casually stroll, to lounge, to idle, and to meander without any real direction in mind. More than any defining physical action, a *flâneur* simply steps out of the march of time, acting more as a detached observer than a rushed participant. In fact, the *flâneur* is so unhurried, so unconcerned and leisurely-paced, that a common trope is of one walking a turtle throughout the streets of Paris.

*Flâneurs* were highly-sensitive and in tune with their surroundings, both immersed and isolated at the same time. He (and it was typically a ‘he’ for societal reasons at the time) is equal parts journalist, artist, and poet – drawing inspiration from the environment with an unending gaze of curiosity. My favorite depiction, and perhaps one of the more famous descriptions of a *flâneur*, comes from Baudelaire, and is worth including at length:

"The crowd is his element, as the air is that of birds and water of fishes. His passion and his profession are to become one flesh with the crowd. For the perfect *flâneur*, for the passionate spectator, it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite. To be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home; to see the world, to be at the centre of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world—impartial natures which the tongue can but clumsily define....we might liken him to a mirror as vast as the crowd itself; or to a kaleidoscope gifted with consciousness, responding to each one of its movements and reproducing the multiplicity of life and the flickering grace of all the elements of life."

Baudelaire sketches a portrait of a figure unfazed by personal needs or wants, completely merging with his environment, and reflecting the joys and perils of the world around him rather than of him. Now fast forward to today, in this modern era of individualism and irony: it can feel incredibly selfish to stop thinking about one's self and just exist.

Since the *flâneur*'s conception as a societal figure, numerous attempts have arisen to interpret the intention of a *flâneur*. Was he anti-capitalist or the epitome of a consumer? More precisely, by 'consuming an experience' rather than 'consuming an object,' the *flâneur* could be viewed as an early advocate of the simple life or as a self-obsessed drag on the nascent economy.

Take this dichotomy a bit further, and you get the fraught notion of a 'dandy,' a similar archetype of the era, but one who redirects that conscious kaleidoscope of the city back onto himself. Vain, cynical, and self-aware to a fault, a dandy is the *flâneur*'s snarky twin, exploiting

class and social divisions rather than through a detached lens of curiosity. Modern writers have their own broad interpretations of the flâneur as well, including one published in the *New Republic* this March ominously declaring 'Death to the Flâneur.' While its point is worth noting – disengagement from identity and the political sphere is an immense privilege offered only to a few – it takes a rather dour and literal interpretation of this playful character.

The flâneur works better as a momentary metaphor than as a literal lens of which to permanently view the world. To forever disappear into an identity-less figure would be just as detrimental as perpetual identification with the ego. Balance, in this case, is knowing when it is appropriate to escape the self and its constant rumination. Much how meditation works to train the brain to pay attention, the practice of flânerie allows a more focused appreciation for the beauty of the world in life's more mundane or troubling moments.

Dig hard enough, and you'll find plenty of literary discussions, academic journals, and popular blogs abound with an analysis of the subject. Rather, I hope to offer my own take of how we can repurpose the flâneur's fantastical framework for expanding our view and relationship with the public realm.

*"Nature is right, but man is straight" -- Henry David Thoreau*

BUT SINCE MOST PEOPLE don't read 19<sup>th</sup>-century French literature on a regular basis, it is important to understand how one might develop an eye for flânerie in the modern world. In this regard, we can look to alternative social identities as nurturers of the concept.

Our queer brothers and sisters, myself included, have both the blessing and curse of a similar sense of detachment from society's moorings: to inherently know that you may not have children or that the world doesn't have a template waiting for you after graduation.

Alternative identities often lead to increased mental and emotional suffering in youth, but can also offer rich sources of inspiration and modes of viewing the world apart from a mainstream, capitalistic, got-to-earn-a-paycheck-to-feed-your-family kind of way.

There is a reason you find a disproportionate number of artists, musicians, and imaginative folk amongst the queer community. If you are both sensitive and confident enough to express your sexuality, you are probably sensitive and confident enough to harness that creative energy by expressing it in the physical realm.

It's easy to want to turn this feeling off, the notion that the world is intentionally gray and only quasi-alive — as if aesthetic pleasure is just a step too far. Fortunately, a move to Portland and years of bipedal reflection have slowly readjusted this mindset. The city and its quirky, human-scaled ethos offered a nurturing environment in which to develop this queer eye, to re-sensitize my discerning gaze. If you'll indulge me, we could refer to it as a *gayze*.

Unburdened by many of society's milestones, my destination-less walks about the city allowed this queer *gayze* to be cultivated in a place that outwardly mirrored my alternative identity. Rather than relying on traditional forms of education when other traditional notions of modernity didn't fit, the slow strolls about Portland took me out of my emotional fugue and into an inverted classroom of architecture, gardens, and community. This broad civics lesson instilled a deep fascination with the public realm and allowed a fine-tuned sense of place to develop within. It offered a form of education that excites rather than instructs.

In reflection, it can feel so privileged to wax nostalgic about a place, to point out the rich detail of peeling layers of paint when most people have mortgages to pay and kids to feed and errands to run. Turn that global microscope of attention on a bit too much and the fear of gentrification emerges. The neighborhood hair salon becomes a bank, the black-owned corner

store becomes a boutique yoga studio, and the longstanding residents get pushed out to distant suburbs without public transit or a sense of community.

I don't have answers to these gigantic problems, and feel the heavy paradox of depicting such beauty and slowness to a world waiting for the next commercial opportunity. But this paradox is a failure of the marketplace and not the place itself.

*"To be native to a place, we must speak its language." – Robin Wall Kimmerer*

VERNACULAR. Spirit of Place. Genius Loci. Topophilia. Psychogeography. Each of these terms hints at the collective, synesthetic sense of place that arises when we simply allow the inherent beauty of a specific plot of land, neighborhood, city, or bioregion to overwhelm our construction of self. This is where an ecological mode of learning calls for a shift in our language. 'Art' is often viewed as a static thing: a sculpture, a painting, or something hanging with a frame around it to be gawked at. We wouldn't usually categorize a walk through a city or a garden as art because it is a dynamic experience, playing out through the flows of time.

But when you walk as an artful (or more accurately, an aesthetic) experience, your *gayze* is full of curiosity, learning, and yes, even desire. When this heightened awareness of the environment is awakened, it only makes sense that you would do everything in your power to care for it, cherish it, and work to make it even more beautiful. This is the foundation of aesthetic ethics, a field that merges art and morality upon the canvas of the environment.

So rather than interpret a flâneur's aimless strolls as pure escapism, it makes more sense to compare it to an educational journey – what Brazilian educator Paulo Freire might have referred to as 'reading the world rather than reading the word.'



As alluded to, visionary place-based educators like David W. Orr, David Sobel, and Fritjof Capra have worked for decades to cultivate this nascent sense in our youth. Reflecting upon their scholarship has inspired me to refocus my career around a general consciousness-raising of place and our shifting relationship to it as interconnected beings.

Throughout the entirety of our evolutionary history, human beings have been avatars of the places we've inhabited. This is reflected in the unfathomable diversity of skin color, language, cuisine, fashion, and religious traditions found on our planet. We used to be, and should yearn to be, mirror images of the place that surrounds us—not the other way around.

Whatever the historical intentions may have been of the fantastical flâneur, my point is not to advocate for vague detachment from the problems of the world, as comforting as that may seem. It simply means knowing when to identify with the 'self,' our individual lens that carries responsibility and can enact change, and when to identify with all of 'life,' that kaleidoscopic lens of the quirky, fascinating rhythmic swirl of a universe we call home. We should fight the urge to force our own thoughts, opinions, actions, reactions, and individuality onto the world and simply walk for a few moments. And with this brief respite, a recognition of the deep responsibility to re-engage with the challenges that surely await your return.

I hope that this written walk and curious *gayze* of flânerie can inspire citizens as students of the world to lace up their actual sneakers and explore, learn from, and form relationships with the unending yet deeply satisfying opportunities for novelty waiting just outside of their front door.

## APPENDIX B:

*Nearing the end of my time as an LSE student, I had the opportunity to refine this notion of an ecological lens through a short fiction assignment in the course Global Political Ecology. Students were encouraged to submit the assignment, which charged us with creating a story of hope and resilience, in conjunction with the annual 'Stories to Change the World' contest. Not only did this piece offer an additional creative outlet for my emerging pedagogy, I was ultimately chosen as the winner of the contest, which included a cash prize, a published submission, and an opportunity to read my story on a stage at the Curious Comedy Theater in Portland. Once again, it reads as a poetic interpretation of the threads that bind my pedagogy: identity, place, and a fresh lens of which to view our relationship with both the human and natural world.*

## Ecology, Technology, Optology

"Mom, I found this article in the closet upstairs," Son yells from across the room. "It says that Grandpa was the creator of Ecological Lenses. Why didn't I know that?!"

"That's right," Mom says, motioning towards the contact lenses in her turquoise eyes.

"Grandpa will be over for dinner in a few minutes. You should ask him."

"I guess I never really thought about what it would be like not to have them in. Everyone wears them, right?"

"They do now, yes. It may be hard to believe, but we didn't have these when I was really little. Now children start wearing them as young as..." Mom pauses, and then interjects. "Look, here he comes now."

The front door opens and a reverent older gentleman enters.

"Grandpa! Hi. Look what I found upstairs!" Son holds up article. "Is it true? Did you create Ecological Lenses?!"

The family sits down to a meal prepared with fruits, vegetables, and nuts gathered from the neighboring garden plot.

"Hello Grandson. I would be happy to share – but you may be surprised. We take for granted the harmony surrounding us, but humans were not always the caretakers that we know today. Taking, taking, taking from the earth, exploiting the living world for own gain -- and eventually paying the price with our own ecological health."

Grandpa sighs as the others look on in rapt attention.

"Pollution, crime, waste, inequality. Oh sure, we managed these for a few hundred years, but it all came to a head with virtual reality. Once people were able to live in their own version of reality, the material world truly began to suffer. After a few serious catastrophes, it became clear how far we had taken the human experiment and people demanded change. But it's very hard to turn back the notion of progress and the forward march of technology..."

"...So instead of reject technology, I decided to accept it and use it for the good of the planet. I came up with the idea of Ecological Lenses while on a hike with your Mother, when she was just a toddler. I noticed how she explored every inch of that forest -- with curiosity, enthusiasm, admiration. I wanted Ecological Lenses to recreate that sense of wonder, for people to see how things flow together in infinite patterns rather than how our language and human gaze break them apart. We won't destroy what we are amazed by. Your generation is a wonderful example – raised in a world that no longer ignores the creatures we share it with."

Son nods.

"They've gotten all sorts of nicknames over the years ... Bio-Bifocals, Rose-Colored Glasses, Systems Thinking Spectacles. I thought Ecological Lenses made the most sense, since they help restore what our ancestors used to see: the interconnectedness of all things."

Family pauses, pays gratitude to all human and non-human creatures that have contributed to the meal, and begin eating.

"You probably don't remember getting your pair in, but we give them to youth at about three years old, just as one learns to name and label things."

"Oh," Son responds. "No, but I do remember my teacher saying that only recently we started referring to things by their relationship to others rather than our domination over them, and using the pronouns *ki* and *kin* for the natural world rather than it. Now I know what she meant."

"That's right," Grandpa begins. "With language comes the power to name something, pass judgement and control. For instance, looking out the window there, we used to refer to that kin as an 'Oregon White Oak' tree. But labels like this don't serve much of a purpose anymore."

"When I look at that kin, I see a relationship to the soil and the microorganisms that feed off of the roots. I see the way the branches provide habitat for bugs and bats and squirrels and songbirds. And I see how generations of humans have worked with and against the kin for their own purposes. Or rather than see these, I understand them and I feel them. Such are the limitations of spoken language."

"Ecological lenses have played an important role in shifting humanity towards a balanced state...but I have a secret to share. Cultures throughout history have used symbols, mantras, and technologies to cultivate their awareness towards a harmony with all things. Ecological lenses are not so different. It may take practice without them, but you'll find that they are more of a reminder than a necessity."

"Really?!" Son bellows. "Mom, should I take them out? What will I see?"

"Hmmm," Mom says reluctantly. "I suppose you are old enough to know what it is like to have them out for a bit. Why don't you go for a walk after dinner without them on and see what you notice?"

Youth eagerly rushes through the rest of his meal and then realizes what he is about to do. With trepidation and help, he slowly pops out the first lens and then the second. A deep inhale, an exhale, and he is out the door.

The sun turns a few degrees, the shadows move slightly, and the minute hand ticks approximately thirty times on the clock. The door opens and slams suddenly, as if Son is running from something.

"You're back," Grandpa says. "What did you see?"

"It didn't look so different...but I felt so...alone," Son stutters. "And disconnected. Like the world had broken apart into many pieces."

"Ahhh. What else?"

"I kept feeling trapped inside my own head and worrying. All I could think about was me."

"That seems right," Grandpa begins. "Before ecological lenses, humans allowed themselves to succumb to petty emotional dramas, forgetting how beautiful the world truly is – from the tallest trees to the most miniscule of microbes. Most importantly, we forgot that we are a part of the great web of life rather than apart from it."

"But then I remembered what you had said," Son shares, proudly. "And I tried really, really hard to focus, and the beauty of the world came rushing back in, and I felt joy and harmony and connectedness again. It happened because I let it happen."

Grandpa smiles.

"Why don't we both take them out and go for a walk together? I can share more about how the world used to be. It's important to understand the history of humanity so we don't repeat our ecological mistakes."

And with that, the pair depart, and the story continues down the winding road as the interlocking web of *ki* and *kin* look on with gratitude.